Eagle of the Week: Kellen Blake

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Photo courtesy of Winthrop Athletics

Blake prepares for his senior season and is hopeful for upcoming homecoming game.

A few years ago, Kellen Blake, native of Arlington, Virginia, found Winthrop through a basketball coach who thought he might be a good fit on the Eagle's basketball team.

"An old basketball coach asked me if I'd like to be a walk-on here. I had no clue what it was but figured I'd give it a shot," Blake said.

The 21-year-old business administration major is one of three walk-ons on the team and is in his third season with the Eagles.

Although Blake has not had much playing time, the time he has had on the court has been impressive.

In his sophomore season, he played for four minutes against Charleston Southern University and sunk the Eagles' 17th three-pointer of the game. That shot tied the school record for three-pointers in a single game.

In his freshman season, he scored seven points in three minutes against Mars Hill. He also scored three consecutive free throws after being fouled in the season opener against Roanoke College.

Blake expects a good season for the team with good reason. Winthrop's men's basketball team was the unanimous preseason pick to win the Big South Conference Championship this year.

"The only really different thing for the team this year is our new additions to the team, some really good freshmen. Other than that the goals are still the same: winning a Big South Championship and going to the NCAA tournament," Blake said.

While Blake hasn't had that specific dream of winning the Big South Conference Championship all his life, sports have been important to him from a young age. He played football, baseball and soccer growing up, but basketball stood out above the others.

"To stay active as a kid my dad would always play sports with me. Basketball was always my favorite since I was about three or four years old, and it just stuck with me," Blake said.

The Winthrop experience will have lasting influence as well.

"Playing here is more than just playing basketball; it's building a family and connections with other students, teachers and people in the community. That's what makes playing for Winthrop different," Blake said.

The Winthrop difference is present in team bonding too. Bonding happens day by day for sports teams, but there are always moments that stand out. One of those moments for Blake was when the team went to a haunted house last year.

"Watching who was scared and who wasn't was probably the funniest moment I've had with the team. The funniest part was one of my teammates was chased by a clown with a chainsaw at the end, and I've never seen [them] run so fast," Blake said

One of Blake favorite memories from his Winthrop experience was playing against High Point last year.

"Playing High Point at home last year this was my favorite game because two of my teammates made ESPN Sportscenter by dunking on the same person. It was crazy," Blake said.

Watching the games lets people share in those experiences.

"People should come to the games because we see fans as a part of our family as well. Coach Kelsey always says they are our sixth man, which is true. Their energy and excitement pumps us up, and we really appreciate it. Also, it's a way for students to meet up with friends and forget about school for a while. It's always a fun time, so come and join us at the Coliseum on game days and not just basketball all-sports," Blake said.

The homecoming game is Nov. 12 at 4 p.m. at the Coliseum.

Politics and movements in sports

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Politics, social movements and sports have been linked in the media numerous times this year: Colin Kaepernick's decision to sit during the national anthem, the NCAA and NBA's decisions to move sporting events away from North Carolina because of HB2 and Josh Brown's release from the Giants a year after his arrest for abusing his wife.

Based on these events alone, it is clear that politics, social movements and sports are linked. Much of this is because professional athletes and athletic organizations are in the public's eye.

Ken Halpin, the athletic director for Winthrop, said politics in sports is no different from politics in actors and entertainment.

"Part of what sports represents is entertainment. People pay to buy tickets to come watch athletic events like a concert or movie. It's no different than politics with actors and entertainment. People pay very close attention, and, therefore, it's easy to share your views with a large audience when you're an athlete, actor or entertainer," Halpin said.

Halpin also noted that it is fair for athletes to express their opinions.

"I think that all athletes, just like all humans, have the right to an opinion on political matters and right to express it. Some more popular athletes have more access to more eyeballs," Halpin said.

Popular athletes anywhere have the ability to gain people's attention. Angela Coello Perez, a sophomore athletic training major, is on the basketball team and is from Spain. She noted that popular athletes like Alba Torrens, a Spanish basketball player, have sway over what their fans think.

"People like and love what she says, so probably people are going to follow what she said only because it's her," Perez said.

The sway athletes have is due to the number of people who hold them in high regard or as role models.

Anne Cushman, a senior English major and player for the soccer team, believes that role models can use their limelight to bring about positive change.

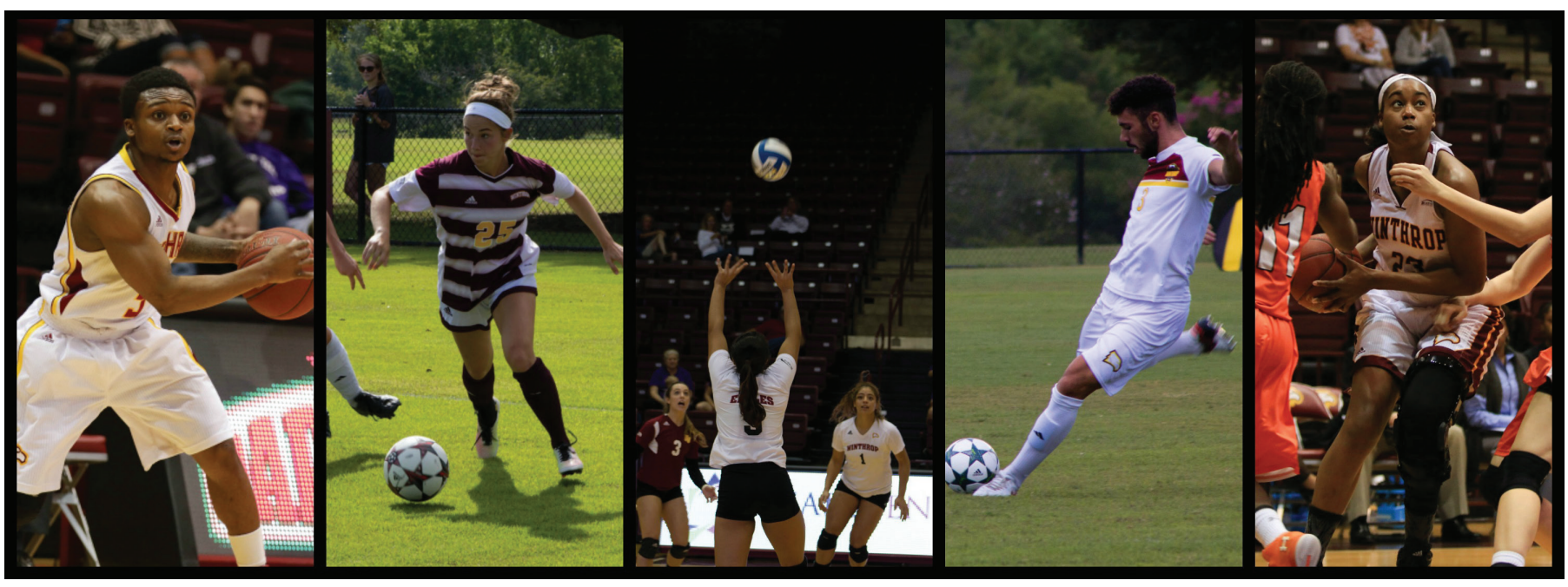
"I think that what [Kaepernick] did was totally great. I think he used his position as a role model to further things that he thought were important in society. He kind of took his power in sports and used it to influence people outside of sports," Cushman said.

That influence can start conversations about social movements, social justice and politics. Halpin said the discussion about the social and political aspects are what makes a difference ultimately.

"People who passionately agree or passionately disagree are what was important in that [Colin Kaepernick's actions] initiated a conversation that's important in this country," Halpin said.

Cushman recognizes that not all athletes need to take a stance on each issue that exists, but she also believes their power is relevant.

"At the end of the day, sports are sports, but if you can use that position to make the world a little bit of a better place I think that's something that's very important," Cushman said.



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